A WORD IN MEMORY OF KURT RIEZLER

BY THEODOR HEUSS*

LET me say quite simply that I loved Kurt Riezler. When we saw each other for the first time, our student days just over, he intrigued me. He was then moving in the border regions of the German Foreign Office, an expert observer, prepared to give advice on matters of publicity to those who sought it. I was not among his clients. However, it was alluring for me to watch his performance. Soon followed the second phase in our relations, my admiration for his wide knowledge, ever at his command and never overbearing, and also for the almost sprightly power of mental combinations which blessed his conversational thinking with elasticity, yes, with sheer elegance. He had the gift of improvisation, and, combined with his intellectual wealth, this might have been a temptation to indulge in playful artistry. Nothing of the sort! The trenchant sarcasm which was ever at his call—sometimes apt to hurt (and sometimes meant to hurt) —was his defense against mediocrity and highflown dramatics.

My admiration turned to love when, after 1918, as members of a circle of political friends, we conversed, consulted each other on our work as publicists. In this phase I came to know the high seriousness of his judgment, clear of illusions, his vivid imagination for the desirable always under the sober control of the possible. His impetuosity was restrained by his sense of responsibility, even in the years after he had freed himself from the actual responsibilities of government service. He saw things realistically as a man of experience who in crucial years had a share in making the wheels of government go round and with acute vision had come to recognize the limits of government action.

While he appreciated its merits, the life of a government servant was not his natural forte. He was too much himself, a focus of

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too many cross-currents. To put it bluntly, officialdom was, or seemed to him, simply too boring. For a venture into free political action he was lacking in ambition; perhaps he did not quite trust his talent for courting "the people" directly. Once, when I saw him at his office of Curator of the University of Frankfurt, I urged half seriously what a pity it was that he had so completely cut himself off from active political life. His comment was that apparently he was good for such a life only in times of revolution. He agreed humorously with me that a revolution could not very well be staged merely for his convenience. He had been so fortunate as to be able to retreat into the world of thought.

I do not command sufficient knowledge or comprehensive judgment on contemporary philosophy to define and characterize Riezler's rightful place in it. But in reading his works, the beauty and enrichment I received lay in the fact that one was invited to join him in his thinking. One felt his hand offered in friendly guidance. No attempt at winning you over by suggestive persuasion, no blinding brilliancy, no showy mental acrobatics to confuse you. You ambled along together, halting for a moment when a thesis seemed to demand a subtle effort at clarification or some safeguard against misunderstanding. And something remarkable happened. Seemingly abstract cogitations in the field of aesthetics, of epistemology, suddenly became endowed with a certain corporeality, glowing in genial charm.

At times, when I summoned into my mind Kurt Riezler's presence—the beautiful landscape of his features, with their spirited and commanding intellectuality, though overcast perhaps with resignation—I would say to our friends: Can you see it? He is on leave in our midst from the court of Lorenzo de' Medici. For in Riezler humanism rediscovered itself in a new affirmation of the human, a radiant upsurge of the free mind over against Savonarola, terrifying image of dark fanaticism. Where, where are our sustaining forces in the uncertain balance of insecure values? Hark Lorenzo's voice, now in encouragement for today, now in forewarning of things to come—"Di doman' non e certezza . . ."